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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Wildmen on the Cyberfrontier: The Computer Geek as an Iteration in the American Wildman Lore Cycle

Joshua Blu Buhs

Abstract

This paper argues that the image of the computer geek that took shape around the turn of the twenty-first century borrowed elements from earlier American constructions of the wildman. In particular, the geek, like prior wildmen, compressed ideas about four conflicting values: liberty and danger, authenticity and fakery.

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In late 1846, the actor Hervey Leech put on a "hair dress," stained his hands and face dark, and appeared at London's Egyptian Hall under the name "What Is It?" (Cook 2001, 126–7). Leech had a made a career of playing apes on stage, but this act was different, for it was not acknowledged as an act. P. T. Barnum was behind the exhibit, and he promoted Leech as a genuine wonder brought out from the uncivilised forests of California. "We know not & therefore do not assert whether it is human or animal," Barnum wrote. "We leave that all to the sagacious public to decide" (Saxon 1983, 37–8). One of that public, though, was *too* sagacious. A half-hour or so after the exhibit opened, he recognised the "What Is It?" as Leech and, according to one account, entered the cage and unmasked him (Cook 2001, 127–8).

Barnum laughed off the exposure—it was a small failure in a long, illustrious career. And the short, unhappy life of the first "What Is It?' might not be worth more than a moment's consideration, except that similar stories of anomalous wildmen were repeated throughout nineteenth-century and twentieth-century American amusements. In September 1869, Mark Twain interviewed a Kansas wildman for *The Buffalo Express*—admitting at the end of the article that the monster was only a synonym for "sensation" (Twain 2004, 22–4). A month later, New York tobacconist George Hull claimed to have found the petrified remains of a giant—only to later reveal that he had hoaxed the creature to prove the credulity of churchgoers, who believed that, yes, there had been giants in those days (Pettit 2006). P. T. Barnum recreated the "What Is It?" display twice more, the final time with William Henry Johnson famously playing the part. When Johnson died, the *New York World* reported that he had finally removed his "mask" and appeared to be only a normal human (Cook 2001, 289). In the late 1960s, Sir Edmund Hillary, a few years removed from conquering Mount Everest, went in search of the Abominable Snowman. The wildman of the Himalayas had excited interest in Europe and North America all through the 1950s (Coleman 1989, 33–93). Hillary, however, concluded that the beast was a myth and wrote an "Epitaph to the

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Elusive Wildman" for *Life* magazine (Hillary 1961, 72–4). Around the same time, word came out of Canada and the USA that a wildman lived there, called—respectively—Sasquatch and Bigfoot. The wildmen were especially popular during the 1970s. Over the years, however, the beasts were repeatedly described as a hoax, most notably, perhaps, in 2002, when the former construction worker Ray Wallace died. His family said that he had started the legend by faking footprints in northern California. Newspapers around the world repeated the claim. "Bigfoot is dead," the *Sacramento Bee* reported in 2002. "Really" (Young 2002, A11).

Far from being just an interesting anecdote, then, the tale of Hervey Leech's can be seen as part of a larger pattern, what W. T. Lhamon has called a "lore cycle." Lore cycles, according to Lhamon, are gestures, performances, and stories that compress a group's (often contradictory) beliefs on some subject or subjects (Lhamon 1990, 98–101; 1998, 69–70). He points to American blackface minstrelsy as an exemplar of the lore cycle: minstrel acts combined interracial fascination and desire with fear and denigration. As elements of the minstrel show evolved between the early nineteenth century and the end of the twentieth century—first among the proletariat, then in theatres, then its elements scattered among other cultural forms, such as the sitcom and hip-hop videos—performers played out various ideas about race, sometimes emphasising the disdain, sometimes the love, and always at least a little of both, altering their acts to address the concerns of the moment. "Lore cycles," Lhamon said, expose "the mediational process of culture that allows people to fit themselves to the stimuli and irruptions of their eras" (1998, 78). "They keep culture travelling and mutating," while also carrying traces of older beliefs (Lhamon 1998, 79).

The American wildman lore cycle took shape right around the time of Leech's performance. Of course, wildmen have been known across space and time—if they are not a universal archetype, then they are close, as beings whose contemplation allows one to play with the boundary between humans and animals. But the image of the wildman underwent significant transformation during the middle of the nineteenth century (Forth 2007). A wildman lore cycle evolved that was peculiar to America, even as it grew out of and drew from other wildman traditions. Scientists no longer believed that wildmen existed, at least not anymore. Theories about organic evolution—including, but not limited to, Darwin's—placed wildmen in the past, as apemen, cavemen, and Neanderthals, while the discovery of the unconscious refigured wildmen as a psychological construct, the libidinal id, the uncivilised monster lurking inside everyone's mind (White 1972, 34; Moser 1998, 107–9). Stories about wildmen after the middle of the nineteenth century not only troubled the line between humanity and animality, but that between authenticity and fakery as well. Wildmen were symbols of a premodern world—a world more authentic than the plastic one built by industrialisation. But they were also hoaxes—elite opinion condemned them as superstitions. In addition, wildmen raised questions about liberty and danger—they were unfettered by civilisation, free to indulge their animal instincts, which was an appealing notion, as well as a frightening one. Over the course of one hundred and fifty years, as this cycle turned, these conflicting—and confounding—ideas compressed into stories about a succession of wildmen.

And the lore cycle continues to spin—never returning, exactly, to where it started, but carrying memories of those past turns (Lhamon 1998, 71).

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The so-called death of Bigfoot did not end the cycle. Certainly, the monster's heyday passed, but belief in its existence persists. More to the point, elements of the American wildman lore cycle still appear in popular culture. Extra-terrestrial aliens are often characterised as wildmen—indeed, some Bigfoot aficionados see the creature *as* an alien (for example, Lapseritis 1998). American discussion of terrorists—living in caves, part animal, hairy, in control of horrendous powers, beyond the reach of civilisation—often draw on the wildman lore cycle (for example, Faludi 2007). This paper will trace the perpetuation of the American lore cycle—or at least elements of the lore cycle—in discussions about the computer geek and cyberspace. It is a story about how the American vocabulary for one stock figure—the wildman—is adapted to fit another, the computer geek. To find the wildman lore cycle informing talk about the geek is not to say that the computer geek *was* a wildman anymore than Lhamon seeing elements of blackface minstrelsy in, say, the videos of M. C. Hammer, means that the rapper's works could be reduced to minstrelsy (Lhamon 1998, 220–6). The image of the computer geek has a long and complicated history, much of it unrelated to wildmen, but it is nonetheless true that pieces of the wildman lore cycle shaped some American discussions of the computer geek during the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s (Eglash 2002). The cycle addressed the era's stimuli and irruptions—the rise of a new place, cyberspace, the breakdown of the social contract between businesses and employees, the re-creation of work, alterations in the nature of reality itself.

A claim such as this one is not subject to verification by mathematical proofs or some piece of clinching evidence. Rather, it is a heuristic, an offer to look at the world from a particular (perhaps oblique) perspective. The argument for this proposition falls into four parts. The first section gives a brief history of the American wildman lore cycle from the mid-nineteenth century into the late twentieth century, based mostly on my own research into this subject. The second section then plumbs the archives of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the work of other historians of geekiness to describe—as much as possible—the connections between the lore cycle and the invention of the computer geek in the 1970s, 1980s, and beyond. The third section relies on the archives of the *Times* and the *Post*; the less extensive archives of the *Boston Globe* and *Raleigh (North Carolina) News & Observer*—both of which did much writing on the geek because of the prominence of the computer industries in their communities; touchstone books in what Harvey Blume calls "Geek Studies"; and the writings of geeks—or at least people considered to be geeks, even if they did not always accept the designation—in the magazine *Wired*, and the underground 'zine *Phrack*, to trace the elements of the wildman lore cycle through discussions about geeks (Blume 2000). The section shows that, although the geek cannot be reduced to a wildman, the logic of the wildman lore cycle helped to organise understanding of the geek and the world that it heralded. Like the wildman, the geek was a symbol of resistance, a symbol of fear, and also a guide into a new world, and stories about it play those three roles against one another. The legend of the wildman helped middle-class American office workers make sense of the world as they saw computers infiltrate their workspaces and change their everyday lives.

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The American Wildman Lore Cycle since the Mid-nineteenth Century

Wildmen have been known to most societies across the span of human existence, from the Mayans to the Chinese, from Melanesians to Germans (Sanderson 1961; Kirtley 1964; Bernheimer 1970; Bartra 1997). In some legends, wildmen steal women and children; in others, they eat disgusting things. Often they are imagined as anthropophagous. At times, they have been interpreted as signs of God's wrath: their horrible disfigurement a warning of what would happen should God withdraw His blessing. At other times, they were proof of God's magnificence or nature's munificence—that the world was filled with every possible form of life, every gap between different kinds of creatures filled by some creature. Some wildmen were thought to have special faculties, abilities lost to civilised humans: the power to command animals, to call up winds and storms, to survive without society. Wildmen proved that there was something more than the known world; their existence simultaneously defined what it meant to be human and suggested the possibility of what it meant to be something else—animal, uncivilised, resident of some not-here world, different.

American versions of the wildmen—separate from, although related to, the more general category of wildman—appeared throughout nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century amusements. Newspapers were rife with accounts of the creatures: Chad Arment collected hundreds for his book *The Historical Bigfoot* (Arment 2006). Many appeared at circuses and other public exhibitions—even zoos (Bradford and Blume 1992). Although these wildmen were associated with leisure time activities, they provoked serious questions about what it meant to be human, to be a civilised member of the middle class. By calling Leech a "What Is It?" Barnum dared his audience to grapple with the thorny issues raised by evolutionary theory and increasingly violent arguments over the humanity of blacks. Interest in wildmen also intersected with anxieties the white middle class had about their own status. Nineteenth-century America valorised self-made men, Horatio Algers who lifted themselves up by their own bootstraps. The problem with self-made men, however, was that they lacked the traditional measures of refinement—learned manners, old money, a family name—and so the line between a respectable man and a con man was vanishingly thin (Halttunen 1986). Wildmen played on this anxiety about authenticity. Was the wildman in the cage real or an actor in a costume? What did it even mean to say that something was real in an age when technologies could reproduce colonial furniture and photographs recreate moments lost to time? When a poor boy could join the ranks of the middle class by dint of hard work?

Attending wildman displays—or reading about them—was simultaneously a way of resisting the cultural changes and easing the transition into the new world. ("Lore cycles are what keep social contests open and at odds," writes Lhamon. "The trajectory of lore cycles presents the way cultures (do not) solve problems"; Lhamon 1998, 78.) The displays reinforced existing hierarchies: the black creature was wild and uncivilised, passive and controlled—all in opposition to the white viewers who attended the exhibits or read about the creatures. At the same time, the wildmen were fascinating exactly because the issue of their authenticity could not be resolved. They embodied not just a past evolutionary stage, but the future, too, a time when identity was less rigid. "By openly celebrating What Is It?

as delightful," wrote historian James Cook, "viewers at least tentatively flirted with the idea of social formlessness as an attractive end in itself" (Cook 2001, 161).

American interest in wildmen dwindled through the beginning of the twentieth century, returning forcefully in the 1950s, first with the news that British mountaineers were hunting the Abominable Snowman in the Himalaya, then with reports Americans were hunting that beast, and finally with claims that a wildman inhabited North America. In early October 1958, newspapers headlined the discovery of a creature called Bigfoot, which was said to haunt the wilds of northern California. Tales of Bigfoot soon became intertwined with legends about a Canadian wildman, referred to in English as Sasquatch. Interest in the monsters ebbed and flowed, declining after Sir Edmund Hillary debunked the Yeti and returning forcefully in 1967 after Roger Patterson claimed to have filmed a Bigfoot walking through the California woods. Bigfoot and Sasquatch were stars of working-class entertainments throughout the 1970s—they were featured in tabloids and men's adventure magazines and cheap paperback novels and exploitation movies all throughout the decade.

These tales raised familiar questions: Were the wildmen real? What would it mean if they were? Were they humans, animals, or something in between, and what did that mean for how society should be organised? Bigfoot—and its associated questions—attracted the attention mostly of white working-class men—men who, typically, lacked higher education, received relatively modest pay, and worked at physically trying jobs under close supervision (Halle 1984, 292–5). Their identity was often tied closely to skill and competence, character and morality—these qualities made them better than the middle class, they thought, even if society chose to pay the middle class more, to literally value them more (Lamont 2000). Skill, too, allowed them to assert their autonomy and resist management (Sennett and Cobb 1972, 237). But in the years after World War II, these characteristics were increasingly degraded as America shifted from an industrial economy to a consumer-based one (Cushman 1995, 210–78; Pendergast 2000, 8–13). Identity instead became tied to what one could buy; personality became more important than character. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, this long-term trend was being accentuated by other changes—working-class white men experiencing anxieties not unlike those endured by middle-class Americans in the last half of the nineteenth century. The post-war economic boom was slowing, and they were doing worse economically. At the same time, blacks were agitating for their constitutionally guaranteed civil rights, women were entering the workforce, and middle-class college students were protesting a war that disproportionately killed the sons of the working class. In many stories and movies, Bigfoot came to represent the forces that white working-class men felt besieged them—Sasquatch was sometimes a stand-in for black men or white women or middle-class elites (Buhs 2009).

In many cases, Bigfoot was also a symbol of resistance to this cultural arrangement. The magazines, books, and movies in which the wildman appeared flattered the mostly male, mostly working-class audience's sense of self-worth, denigrating the womanly art of shopping and championing traditional notions of character. Russ McChord, for example, the main character in Michael Knerr's *Sasquatch: Monster of the Northwest Woods* was "a lonely man, part of what was left of the great American cowboy; a man who lived in the modern world but had

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roots in the last century. A horseman in a world of autos, a hard worker in a land of relatively easy money" (Knerr 1977, 27). But at the same time, Bigfoot helped to ease the working-class men into the world of consumerism and mass culture. The movies in which it appeared during the 1970s were the ones to pioneer audience research and targeted marketing (Wasser 1995). The books and magazines that made the creature into a celebrity were also products of this system, using the language of resistance—but to sell, sell, sell (Parfrey 2003, 5–10).

In the 1980s, Bigfoot passed into the middle class, where it was domesticated. Many of the stories about the creature for the working class were sexually graphic and violent, with rape a common motif. That was less often true of middle-class amusements—instead, the beast was shown as docile, often vegetarian, and threatened, rather than threatening. Although more slickly produced, middle-class stories about Bigfoot lacked much of the vitality associated with the working-class versions of the beast, still, it is worth spending a moment on examples of the wildman from the 1980s, because it is from this vantage point that the turning of the lore cycle becomes obvious. The Sasquatch from the movie "Harry and the Hendersons" was the iconic image of the bourgeois Bigfoot (Coleman 2003, 213). He was kind and wise and noble, but even in a movie aimed at families there remained hints of the more terrible beast. The teenage girl in the movie, alone among the characters, recognised that Harry was male and she would not allow him into her bedroom. Later, Harry ate her corsage—a symbolic deflowering, which was repaired when he brought her a bouquet of flowers—uprooted from a female neighbour's yard—and the girl welcomed him into her bedroom. Thus, underneath what one reviewer called the "cloying, manipulative, and overcute" veneer was a primal, and dangerous, creature (Hinson 1987, B7). The lore cycle compressed conflicting images—of authenticity and danger—and while the movie emphasised one value it could not erase the traces of the other.

The Computer Geek and the American Wildman Lore Cycle

The word "geek" dates back at least to the sixteenth century when "geck" was used to designate a fool (Anderegg 2007, 26). Shakespeare used it in his plays *Twelfth Night* and *Cymbeline* (Carruthers and Chambers 1863, 99 and 121; Shakespeare 1911, 122). In America, the word became attached to the carnival (Nickell 2005, 205). The geek was one example of wildmen prominent in nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century amusements, alongside the "What Is It?" and Cardifff giant. The geek was a dipsomaniac who had fallen so low that he would do anything for a drink: cavort with reptiles or—most notoriously—bite the head off a live chicken. It was a term of opprobrium, designating someone so degraded that he could not even meet the carnival's expansive definition of humanity, someone barely human at all. As late as 1945, the *New York Times* treated geek as a word likely to be unknown to anyone beyond the circus, and therefore in need of explanation (Bender 1945, 79).

That seems to have changed the following year, when Lindsey Gresham published his classic noir novel *Nightmare Alley*, about the rise and fall of a carnival con man, Stanton Carlisle (Anderegg 2007, 26). "Where did he come from?" the barker asked of the geek in the novel's opening pages.

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> God only knows. He was found on an uninhabited island five hundred miles off the coast of Florida. My friends, in this enclosure you will see one of the unexplained mysteries of the universe. Is he man or is he beast? You will see him living in his natural habitat among the most venomous reptiles that the world provides. Why, he fondles those serpents as a mother would fondle her babes (Gresham 1986, 3–4).

The geek was the thing that Carlisle detested—he felt "disgust" for the snakes,"at their having to be penned up with such a specimen of man." Later that year, Tyrone Power played Carlisle in a movie adaptation of the novel (Coe 1947, 24). With that, the word entered the general American lexicon, its meaning standard across a wide range of cultural pursuits, from pornography to circuses and wrestling to literary criticism and literary fiction.

In the 1970s, interest in geeks seemed to increase for some reason—perhaps because the word rhymed with freak, which was a widely used epithet for drug users and hippies (Anderegg 2007, 28). Cultural critic Leslie Fiedler suggested that it was the result of the sexual revolution, which undid the taboo around oral sex. Geeks became appealing, he argued, because they symbolised "the desire to eat and be eaten by the other, and the self-punishing fantasy that the mouth which opens to receive our genitals may clamp down to maim and destroy us" (Fiedler 1993, 344). Geeks may also have been fascinating because of their associations with consumerism—their willingness to imbibe anything, everything, a phantasmagoric reflection of the American pastime. Whatever the value of such speculation, the fact is that geeks did become fashionable, appearing, as Fiedler noted, "everywhere in our culture, from the *National Lampoon* to the TV cop show 'Starsky and Hutch,'" to experimental novels (Fiedler 1993, 344). A pornographic film about Bigfoot released in the late 1970s was called "Geek." Throughout this era, the word geek retained its negative connotations. Wrestler—and one-time carny—"Classy" Freddie Blassie sang in a campy 1977 song, "If there's one thing lower than a side show freak, it's a grit eating, scum sucking, pencil neck geek" (Blassie and Greenberg 2004, 212).

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, this definition of geek was being modified, changing in places hard to see, in ways hard to document (Anderegg 2007, 27). First, geek came to suggest intelligence. The *New York Times*'s amateur linguist William Safire reported in 1980 that college students used the term "pencil geek" to refer to classmates who were not just bookish but competitive also, studying too much, willing to resort to means other students found degrading for a good grade (Safire 1980, SM2). The imputation of desperation may be the reason that geek was applied to hard-working students—not that they bit heads from chickens, but that they might consider it. Or perhaps the studious were called geeks because they isolated themselves from other people. Maybe there was even a connection with Blassie's song, which became something of a camp classic, favoured among the college set (Blassie and Greenberg 2004, 212). Whatever the reason, this sense of the geek as diligent students found favour.

The second change in the meaning of the word replaced the sense of degradation that attached to the geek with its opposite: transcendence. At the end of Gresham's novel, Carlyle Stanton, the novel's main character, assumed the role of the geek. It was a sign of his fall, his ultimate worthlessness. Thirty or so years later, Craig Nova wrote *The Geek* about Boot, an American on a Greek island who

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became involved with drug-running, murder, and pointless sex—all the sins of the counterculture. He escaped these horrors by joining a dilapidated carnival as the geek:

> Boot bit the head off, tasted blood, felt his teeth severing tendons, breaking bones, the skull, tasted the bitter brains, broke the palsied beak, felt an eye burst: he swallowed … His gaze was distant and steady, since he was now safe, in league with everything he had despised, having found immunity by relinquishing all that had made struggle necessary: honour, character, word, anger (Nova 1975, 207).

It seems doubtful that Nova's novel, alone, altered the meaning of geek. His use of the word was an example of alterations in the definition rather than the cause.

This period also saw an unexpected—and fateful—change in the vocabulary used to discuss computers and their aficionados. For most of the post-war period, computers were associated with the military–industrial complex, bureaucracies, and rigid hierarchies—they had been synecdoches for these during the New Left Free Speech movement, for instance (Turner 2006, 11–12). In the late 1970s and into the 1980s, however, a group of San Francisco Bay Area-based writers and journalists connected to Stewart Brand—founder of the *Whole Earth Catalog* and proponent of 1960s' back-to-the-land, communitarian liberalism—began connecting computers to counter-cultural ideas (Markoff 2005; Turner 2006, 87–8 and 135–9). "Over time," writes Fred Turner, historian of this development:

> the network's members and forums helped redefine the microcomputer as a "personal" machine, computer communication networks as "virtual communities," and cyberspace itself as the digital equivalent of the western landscape into which so many communards set forth in the late 1960s, the "electronic frontier" (Turner 2006, 6).

Computer users were reconfigured as the descendants of hippies—and, through that link, as embodying the Romantic ideal of the Native American: they became modern wildmen. Some from this circle of journalists and writers went on to found *Wired* magazine, which was especially influential in setting out this mythology of computers and their users (Turner 2006, 207–36).

These combined changes in the connotation of geek and the connotation of computers came together in the 1980s as geek became an epithet for those who used computers. Perhaps geek suggested itself because it rhymed with "phreak," the name used by those who learned to manipulate telephonic systems in the early 1970s, many of whom went on to become computer hackers. Geek also became available in this context because of alterations in its meaning. Computer users inhabited the fringe of society—old connotations remained—but that had more to do with social awkwardness and keen intelligence, and less with disgusting habits. The sense of transcendence now borne by the word captured the intense relationship between users and their computers—the geek found nirvana in the electric signals of their machines. To enter this state of transcendence was to "geek out," to lose one's self in the intricacies of computers (Jargon File 2003). In 2000, writer Jon Katz distilled the new sense of the word. Geeks, he said, had a "tendency toward braininess and individuality." They were "identifiable by a singular obsessivity about the things they love, both work and play, and a well-honed sense of bitter, even savage, outsider humor" (Katz 2000, xii).

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Not all computer users took to this designation, though. In 1985, a group of hackers and phone phreaks started publishing the online 'zine *Phrack*, with tidbits of gossips, how-to articles for those who aspired to crack into computers and the telephone system, and musings on anarchism. In time, the 'zine also published profiles of seminal hackers and phreaks. One question posed to most of the interviewees asked if they considered themselves, or other computer enthusiasts, a geek—already a sign that the term was held in low regard. Almost all denied being a geek or knowing many. (A prominent exception was the single female profiled in *Phrack*, who considered most everyone else in the community a geek; "Chanda Leir" 1989, file 2.) Hacker was the label of choice. Geek was pejorative, carrying racial overtones and, through those, the suggestion of carnality, of the bestial—which was antithetical to the transcendent hope of merging with the computer, melting into the ether. In one humorous article for *Phrack*, geek was used as a synonym for lame, crack dealer, and welfare-momma's-boy—the last two especially racially evocative ("New IRC Utility" 1991, file 2). Eric Raymond, who wrote *The New Hacker's Dictionary*, defined the computer geek as the technological version of the carny freak:

> One who eats (computer) bugs for a living. One who fulfills all the dreariest negative stereotypes about hackers: an asocial, malodorous, pasty-faced monomaniac with all the personality of a cheese grater. Cannot be used by outsiders without implied insult to all hackers… (Raymond 1992, 65–6).

But as computers spread through American society and the number of users grew, it became increasingly difficult for the boys and young men who had rushed to embrace computers and the nascent internet to resist the appellation. Throughout the 1990s, thanks especially to *Wired*, cyberspace came to be seen as a frontier; that does not mean it was a frontier—indeed, the entrance to this frontier sat on one's desk—but imagining frontiers is common in America, and cyberspace came to be seen as the reincarnation of the Old West, wild and woolly (Smith 1995, 37–52; Davis 1998, 164–84; Rheingold 2000). Underlining this point, America's previous wildman, Bigfoot, repeatedly appeared here, cyberspace being as much a frontier as the forests of the Pacific Northwest. "There's just something about Bigfoot and the Internet," wrote Tom Maurstad in the *Dallas Morning News*. "Who could have guessed that the high-tech futuristic frontier of the Web would become such a hospitable habitat for the legendary beast?" (Maurstad 2002). In the early 1990s, Bigfoot Industries offered the first Internet White Pages; one of the first search engines was named Yahoo—an exclamation, but also the wildmen in *Gulliver's Travels*. The old wildmen were performing one of their traditional tasks, guiding the perplexed.

More often than Bigfoot, though, the computer geek was figured as the wildman of cyberspace. Journalist G. Pascal Zachary claimed that the geek was the modern example of the "noble savage" (Zachary 1995, file 22). Essayist Harvey Blume wrote in 2000, "The geek is an update of an ancient type—the wild man" (Blume 2000). Writer William Gibson, who invented the term cyberspace—and much of the mythology that went along with it—called those who braved it "cowboys"—a name that evoked John Wayne and other frontiersman unfit for civilised society (Leland 2004, 323). The language that hackers used to describe themselves could curl back, too, and make them into the geek—the wildman—that

they so despised. *Wired* magazine, for example, compared the new breed of computer users to Native American chiefs—both examples of men who lived on the edge of civilisation because they could not operate according to its codes (Leland 2004, 315). The formulation was difficult to resist: computer enthusiasts were geeks, and geeks were the wildmen of the cyberfrontier.

The What Is It? and similar circus wildmen raised questions about the status of the middle class as the economy shifted to an industrial one. Bigfoot and its relatives embodied American working-class men's fear of, resistance to, and accommodation of a consumer economy. The geek helped the American middle class to make sense of what was being called "the new economy"—an economy increasingly driven by information technology. And it did so by elaborating upon the elements of the American wildman lore cycle. One construction of the geek emphasised authenticity and liberty at the expense of fakery and danger. Cyberspace was a brave new world where men (and women) of true grit could test their mettle and liberate themselves from the confines of the fake world of everyday life, one in which the individual was always in danger. But there were other ways to arrange the elements.

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Dining with the Cannibals

"What's new about the new economy," opined *Time* magazine, "is that it's scary all the time, not just in cycles" (Gibbs 1997, 64). Since the 1970s, economic risk had been increasingly shifted away from government and businesses and on to workers (Sennett 1998; Smith 2001; Hacker 2006). "For almost a century, business and government worked in tandem to expand the economic protections afforded working Americans through social insurance programs and career employment," said University of Pennsylvania economist Peter Cappelli. "In the last 25 years, we've stripped most of these away" (Gosselin 2004, A1). During the 1970s, on average families saw their income swing up and down by as much as sixteen per cent each year; by the 1990s, volatility had climbed to about thirty per cent (Gosselin 2004, A1). Loss of jobs became more common: in the late 1980s, fifty-six per cent of corporations said that loyal employees deserved the assurance of continued employment; in the 1990s, only six per cent did (Gibbs 1997, 64). At the same time, the government offered less help in job reassignments and scrimped on welfare, leaving more people vulnerable (Hacker 2006).

These conditions squeezed white-collar Americans, made them fearful of the workplace (Fraser 2002). Cubicles were sardonically referred to as "veal pens," places where workers were fattened before they were slaughtered—or fired (Borsook 2000, 164). William Browning Spencer's award winning horror novel *R—sum—with Monsters* imagined the modern office threatened by the demonic creatures of H. P. Lovecraft's pulpy novels (Spencer 1995). An anonymous essayist on the website Suck.com—a patch of cyberspace devoted to sarcastic riffs on American culture—had a similar sense, arguing that work had become the same as "Dining with Cannibals" (POP 1996). The writer complained, "The computer industry eats people, consumes them whole, and spits out bleached-white bones." It was a description that applied not only to the computer industry, but to all working places where the competent were abused. "Why should I make that evil bastard in the corner office rich?," the writer asked. "Why should he get a million

dollars for the product I architected? For my product? The product he's too stupid to understand?"

The geek often—although not exclusively—became the focus of this diffuse fear, just as What Is It? and Bigfoot had channelled economic concerns in their eras, emphasising danger (over freedom) and authenticity (over fakery): this was a second way of arranging the elements of the American wildman lore cycle, making the geek a true monster. Already at the time, Americans were anxious that something was wrong with their boys—that educational institutions and feminism had conspired to warp them into monsters (Gabarino 1999; Kindlon and Thompson 2000; Consalvo 2003). Geeks were one product of this system—dangerous, amoral boys who threatened the struggling middle class. Groups of geeky boys interacting online were christened gangs; many of these boys were working class, and many of them adopted punkish dress—modelling themselves on the styles described in Gibson's writings—making the label an easy one to apply (Sterling 1993; Slatalla and Quittner 1995). Their self-chosen name "hacker" conjured images of mass murderers. Like the wildmen that came before them, geeks were often only known by "a vaporous trail of … footprints," invisibility being one more reason to be frightened (Tsutomu and Markoff 1996, 2). And, like other wildmen, geeks were cannibalistic, just as the writer on Suck.com had suggested. Hacker Chris Goggans, who went by the handle "Eric Blood Axe," compared others of his ilk to the notorious cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer (Goggans 1995, file 4). "Always there is a sinister side of the Internet, a creepy class of users without reverence for rules or truth or justice or life itself," declared the *Washington Post* (Weeks 1999, C1).

The threatening geek—like some European wildmen of yore—controlled powers that seemed unimaginable, that could destroy the world. The 1983 movie "War Games" told the story of a geek who almost launched a nuclear attack. John Perry Barlow, one of the early promoters of cyberculture, became entangled in a feud with a hacker who showed him up by posting his credit report to a bulletin board. "I've been in redneck bars wearing shoulder-length curls, police custody while on acid, and Harlem after midnight, but no one has ever put the spook in me quite as [the hacker nicknamed] Phiber Optik did at that moment," he wrote. "To a middle-class American, one's credit rating has become nearly identical to his freedom" (Tabor and Ramirez 1992, B1). In April 1999, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris went on a shooting rampage at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, killing twelve students, a teacher, and themselves as well as wounding many more. Immediately, the mass media speculated widely and wildly about the two boys' motivations. They were characterised in a number of ways—as losers, as Goths, as lost boys, as part of a mafia, as the bullied, as atheists—and, also, as geeks. This complex episode cannot be reduced to geeklore anymore than the geek can be reduced to a single meaning, but it is still possible to see the wildman lore cycle spinning in some of the discussions of the massacre. Klebold's and Harris's attacks were taken as an example of the dangers posed by the Internet—by the way that the new technology could lead in a very literal, very horrendous way to the death of the middle class. "It's far too early to draw conclusions about Columbine," wrote Robert Denerstein in an essay titled "Into the Heart of Darkness" five days after the shooting. But then he went on to blame "electronic communications, subterfuge and illicit activity," the "borderless fantasy world"

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of cyberspace providing "ample room for hatred" (Denerstein 1999, 31A). A Gallup poll taken the week of the shootings found that eighty-two per cent of people thought that the internet was at least partly to blame for the shootings and thirty-four per cent thought that it was one of the causes that deserved "a great deal of blame" ("Poll" 1999).

The middle class struggled to control this new wildman. A new genre of morality tales came into being—stories that worked to make cyberspace safe. These paralleled the etiquette books of the nineteenth century that tried to solve the middle class's problem of social formlessness (Kasson 1990). *Time*, *Newsweek*, *USA Today* and the *New York Times* were filled with stories about cybersleuths tracking down and capturing cyberthieves, restoring order, punishing evil. Similarly themed books abounded—*Takedown*, *The Cuckoo's Egg*, *The Watchman*, *The Hacker Crackdown* and *Masters of Deception* (Stoll 1989; Sterling 1993; Slatalla and Quittner 1995; Tsutomu and Markoff 1996).

In the wake of the Littleton massacre, other geeky students were viewed with heightened suspicion (Katz 2000, 146–52; Thomas 2002, 177–237). A self-proclaimed "geekchick" ("there aren't many of us," she said) in suburban Chicago was sent to the nurse's office and searched because she wore a trench coat similar to the one that Klebold and Harris favoured (Katz 2000, 150). Parents of a New England student took away his computer because they were afraid of what had happened—they could not predict the sinister influence of the new technology. Although these clampdowns occurred across the country, reports indicated that they primarily affected the middle class. The legal director of the Ohio ACLU told the *Washington Post*, "This is an upper-middle-class, suburban phenomenon. What they see coming from TV is a mirror image of themselves. It becomes very easy for people to imagine it happening here, because here looks so much like there" (Cooper 1999, A1). The geek played the role of What Is It?, of Bigfoot, haunting the nightmares of the American middle class as the twentieth century gave way to the next.

The geek played, as well, another, contradictory role. Just as the What Is It? and Bigfoot had also been symbols of resistance to the coming order, defending tradition against change, racial hierarchy against formlessness, the value of work against consumerism, so too did stories about the geek sometimes figure it as a representative of a past, more humane world. Geek understanding of computers was sometimes seen not as mastery of magic, but of artisanal knowledge. The geek was a traditional craftsman, but was neglected in the corporate world, or so went the popular mythology, ignored by managers, fired during bouts of downsizing—the geek was not the cannibal, but the cannibal's victim. In 1997, the computer magazine *Network World* editorialised—under the headline, "Geeks and Nerds, Arise!"—"Consider this: the best trained, most sought after, highest paid workers in the U.S. economy are routinely insulted and affixed with negative stereotypes by the general, business and, yes, even the computer trade press" (Gallant 1997, 34). This understanding of the geek played up different aspects of the wildman lore cycle, arranging the elements in a third way, to emphasise danger and fakery: the new world was fake and dangerous, overwhelming those who embodied traditional—authentic—values.

The iconic representation of the wildman in this context was not the amoral cyberpunk, but the cartoon character Dilbert. A geeky technophile whose

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intentions were constantly undermined by bumbling, mendacious management, Dilbert first appeared in newspapers in 1989. Importantly, the character lacked a mouth—he could not eat, only be eaten. *Time* magazine deemed Dilbert's creator, Scott Adams, the minstrel of layoffs: "The Trojan war had Homer. The Spanish-American war had William Randolph Hearst. Every calamity has its bard, and downsizing's is Scott Adams" (van Biema 1996, 82). The Dilbert comic strip ran in eight hundred newspapers by 1996, reaching sixty million people—and became a way of expressing and resisting power relations. According to Adams, disgruntled workers stuck Dilbert comics to their managers' doors. The word was turned into a verb—one could be Dilberted—meaning "to be exploited or taken advantage of" (Deep 1997, 20). It was a synonym of geeksploitation, itself a play on the 1970s term blaxploitation (Branwyn 1997). Race, in this sense, was less about the colour of one's skin than one's position in the corporate hierarchy. To be Dilberted was to be rendered black, no matter how pale your skin was. It was a sign of the perilous possibility of extinction—and, also, a way of striking back against that possibility, of maintaining one's dignity even as the new economy tried to strip it away.

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Geek Chic

The elements of the American wildman lore cycle could be arranged in a fourth way, highlighting freedom and fakery at the same time. This was the structure of feeling experienced by those, for instance, who saw the What Is It? suspected it was fake, but still enjoyed the experience (Cook 2001, 160–2). ("The public," Barnum said, "appears disposed to be amused even when they are conscious of being deceived; Cook 2001, 16.) Or, the emotions embodied in those who were certain that Bigfoot did not exist, but still found the idea of it wonderful (Saler 2003; 2004). In the case of the geek, this mixture led to an appreciation of the geek's powers—the geek's liberty—and of the world that he (or she) was creating, fake though it was. The geek, like so many wildmen before, was a guide into a new world. Not, in this case, a world of social formlessness or working-class consumerism, but a decidedly weird place, where the boundary between human and machine had moved, if it had not been completely erased.

In the mythology that developed, the geek was seen as an extension of the computer, inhabitant of a completely fabricated realm, a virtual—and therefore—fake, reality. A computer enthusiast at MIT told sociologist Sherry Turkle:

> When you type into the machine you can go really fast. The touch is very sensitive. I don't even feel that I am typing … I am thinking it, and then there it is on the screen. I would say that I have a perfect interface with the machine … perfect for me. I feel totally telepathic with the computer (Turkle 2005, 194).

In *Phrack*, Hacker Grandmaster "Swamp" Ratte recalled a time when he:

> found myself all alone at night inside a [telephone company's] switching station. Ooh, look … a terminal keyboard. In the dim glow of the red 'EXIT' signs, that keyboard represented all my hopes for a glorious unification of the human spirit through the global telecommunications network. How could I best express my … love … for this network and all that it represents? Write a poem? Done it already, hundreds of times. Every [computer] file I've put out is a gesture of affection. So I did what any red-blooded American male would do. I dropped my pants,

> "threw jacks" as it were, and doused that human-machine interface unit with my Seekrut Sauce ("Grandmaster 'Swamp' Ratte" 1997, file 4).

Whether the story is true or make-believe is beside the point. It expressed in graphic terms the connection that was supposed to exist between the geek and the machine: they were lovers. They were one.

This intimate connection to computers and the intricate world beyond the screen blessed the geek with powers unavailable to others—as some wildmen were seen to have abilities beyond those of the average human: Merlin, in some stories, was a wildman (Bernheimer 1970, 13). The Internet came to be seen as the engine of economic growth, and the geek—and the geek alone—could control it. Technology writer Howard Rheingold said:

> Suddenly you could be two Stanford students, and you could buy GE a couple of years later. Old money that had taken most of the century to amass was suddenly eclipsed, not just by new money, but new money that was based on technical knowledge (Leland 2004, 331).

"Geek implies wealth," author Douglas Coupland noted in 1995 (Coupland 1995, 173). Three years later, Stephen Glass wrote a story for *The New Republic* about Ian Restil, a geek who broke into the computer system of Jukt Micronic—and was rewarded with a job. The entire episode, the characters, the company—all were invented from whole cloth, much to *The New Republic*'s embarrassment (Kitty 2005, 235–7). But the story had passed muster with the magazine's editors, probably because it seemed to impart an essential truth of the new economy: outsiders were becoming the new insiders.

The geek was the celebrity of this new age—and non-geeks wanted to be like him (or her), wanted to follow them to the Promised Land. Social awkwardness seemed a minor liability when technical knowledge could earn millions (Bronson 2000). "There is an aura of cachet lent to those who might embody the essence of 'Geek Chic,' a trendy new term that calls to mind images of too-cool-for-school horn-rimmed glasses, the latest in sleek, Palm-Pilot design and lots of black clothing," noted the Raleigh, North Carolina, *News & Observer* in 1999 (Dyrness 1999, D1). Geekiness was central to a lot of hip-hop music (Leland 2004, 329–35). Neil Feinman's book *Geek Chic* rewrote history, transforming Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Edison, among others, into pioneering geeks (Feinman 2005). Some computer enthusiasts began to embrace the term—there were "Geek Pride" events and T-shirts celebrating one's geekiness (Lindsey 2004, C1). Raymond updated his definition, incorporating the new connotations that had developed since the 1970s: a geek was "a person who has chosen concentration rather than conformity; one who pursues skill (especially technical skill) and imagination, not mainstream social acceptance" (Jargon File 2003). Jon Katz concluded his definition of the word, "In this era, the Geek Ascension, a positive, even envied term. Definitions involving chicken heads no longer apply" (Katz 2000, xii).

But even as many computer enthusiasts embraced the term, some hackers resented the assimilation—they saw the world that they had created becoming crowded, plastic, another gew-gaw for sale: fake, not authentic. "The settlers have taken over cyberspace," complained *Wired* magazine, "and now the natives dance for trinkets" (Leland 2004, 315). "The hacker mindset has become a nonexistent commodity in the new corporate and media-friendly 'underground,'" said

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Shockwave Rider ("Shockwave Rider" 2000, file 0x04). Douglas Thomas, sympathetic chronicler and explicator of hacker culture, made a related argument, claiming that assimilation was more apparent than real, that the geek would always remain an outsider—its essence was opposed to mainstream values (Thomas 2002, 153–6). The same, however, had been said about Jack Kerouac and the beats, about jazz, about rock-n-roll. And, of course, those were folded into American consumerism, too, just as geeks were, whatever the protests of some hackers. Geekish technophilia became an essential part of consumerism. Geek culture fits well with *fin de siecle* capitalism (Smith 2001, 90–119). It was relaxed, oriented toward work, casual, allowing freedom in the corporate world—tales of nudists and games of Naked Twister at the office proliferated. The corporate world might be fake, the products of industrialisation inauthentic, but there was a way to embrace this world and, through it, find liberty. Geeks, said *Wired*, were "the most powerful people on the planet today" (Leland 2004, 314).

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Conclusion: The Kids are All Right

In his novel *Neuromancer*, William Gibson defined cyberspace as "a consensual hallucination," and it did take more than a little imagining to see cyberspace as a frontier—even a fake one (Gibson 1984, 51). In many ways, computers were the furniture of drudgery, like the cubicle walls that surrounded them. The geek, too, was part of this consensual hallucination.

Certainly, some geeks were dangerous; many did try to live up—or down, as it were—to the criminal ideal of the cyberpunk; the massacre at Columbine was, by any measure, horrendous. In retrospect, however, it seems clear that the geek was not the threat that it appeared to be in the press—nor was the geek the promise that it was made out to be, either, of a transcendent future. The *Phrack* profiles suggest that boys commonly started their exploration of cyberspace in their preadolescent years, using the computers—which were approved of, in fact usually purchased by, parents—to carve out a space away from parents' prying eyes. Sometimes these explorations graduated into outright teenage rebellion, but, generally, by the time that they were in their twenties, many, if not most, hackers had retired. Thus, it seems clear that computers and cyberspace were for many of these boys what the Freudians call transitional objects, aiding in their development from one stage of life to another, then discarded (Erikson 1963, 258–60). Geeks were, in this sense, continuing the American boys' tradition of tinkering with the latest technology—and through that tinkering creating their identity, their sense of self (Thomas 2002, 75–80 and 206–12). There was nothing particularly troubled about these boys, nor the generation from which they sprang. On the contrary, scholastic achievement was at the highest levels in thirty years during the mid-1990s, and crime by juveniles was at its lowest in the same time period (Ziedenberg and Vincent Schiraldi 1998; "The National Report Card" 2005).

At some point, this consensual hallucination will end, and the glue that holds these legends together will dissolve (Daston 2000, 1–14). Cyberspace will no longer be a frontier. "In the future," said one hacker:

> it will be everywhere, but it won't be called cyberculture. It will just be called culture. A few years ago, people used to talk about "the emerging TV culture." We know longer talk about

> a "TV culture" today. It's a given. Someday soon, no one will talk about 'emerging cyberculture.' Because it will be a given, too (Cobb 1992, 32).

And when that time comes, the geek, too, will lose its relevance, and join Bigfoot, the yeti, Barnum's What-Is-It? and all the other wildman that live on the far side of the frontier that we can never cross, that inhabit the one country we can never visit: the past. The wildman itself, however, will not die, but be reborn in some other form as the lore cycle continues spinning into the future.

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